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The merit system in road management

Boston

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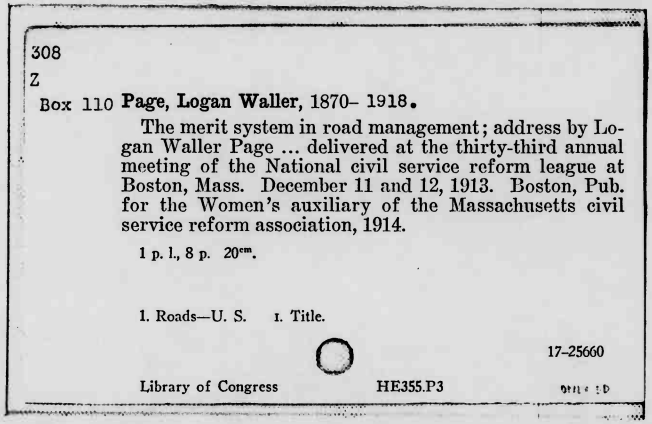

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The Merit System in Road Management

Address by
Logan Waller Page
Director of the Office of Public Roads
Department of Agriculture

Delivered at the Thirty-third Annual Meeting
of the
NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE
At BOSTON, MASS.
December 11 and 12, 1913

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1914

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The Merit System in Road Management

LOGAN WALLER PAGE, DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC ROADS, DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

In considering the application of the merit system to the management of the public roads of this country, it may be well at the outset to present an inventory, so to speak, showing what is comprised in our public road system, and what is involved in the construction, maintenance, administration, and use of the public roads.

Broadly speaking, the public roads of the United States comprise a transportation system nearly ten times as great in mileage as all of the railroads of America combined, or approximately 2,300,000 miles. The annual expenditure on these roads is estimated at the present time to be approximately $200,000,000. No census has been taken to show the number of officials having to deal with the management of the roads, but 100,000 would be a conservative estimate. It is thus evident that we are dealing with a public utility which is of sufficient magnitude to warrant the most serious and earnest consideration from thoughtful American citizens as well as from every unit of American government.

Aside from the question of magnitude, we must consider the public road system of the United States as the only one of the great systems of transportation which is owned and controlled by the public, and in which every tax payer, rich or poor, is a share holder. The wisdom of public ownership is a mooted point, but there can be no question that a great utility which is already owned by the public should be administered with an efficiency at least equal to the management of privately owned utilities. If this is impossible we should discover the intrinsic weakness in our system which renders such management impracticable.

As most of the original colonies were under English control and largely recruited from English people, it followed that the old common law and the various customs

of England should find lodgment in the political institutions of the new country. The result of this was that the principle of local autonomy with corresponding local control and management of roads was firmly established at an early date. When the colonies became states these laws and customs were but little changed, and in many cases they have come down to the present day perpetuating a system which now has no justification from the standpoint of either utility or sentiment. Briefly explained, this system is one of extreme localization whereby in most of the states each precinct is in charge of a road overseer who reports to a county board of commissioners with many and bewildering interlockings of other officialdom such as supervisors, trustees and superintendents. As a natural consequence the road system of each state is divided into an amazingly large number of miniature systems each independent of the other. The revenues for road purposes are largely expended in the payment of salaries and expenses of an unnecessarily large number of road officials whose duties and responsibilities are at best vague.

It seems never to have occurred to our early law makers that any particular skill or knowledge was required in the building or maintenance of roads, consequently, with but few exceptions, legislation in the various states makes no requirement that those officials who are charged with the improvement and care of the roads shall possess any distinct qualifications. In logical sequence the men who are selected for this work are for the most part men whose popularity or influence in the community is such as to enable them to obtain the office for themselves or their friends, without regard to their special fitness for the position. The roads are as a rule cared for by well intentioned and intelligent farmers who know little or nothing about road work, and who give to this public duty only such time as they can spare from their private interests.

These road officials are not required by law or regulation to give all of their time or even a considerable portion of it to road work. Nor do the laws or regulations provide for any reasonably thorough inspection or maintenance. The compensation which is paid to local officials is usually very small, so far as the individual is concerned but very large in a collective sense. As a consequence a further tendency is shown to consider the road as a mere side issue and to discourage the skilled and competent road builder from undertaking a work on which he could not make living compensation, and under a system in which he would have to operate with almost a certainty of failure.

Still another characteristic of our public road system is the election of road officials for definite terms of office rather than the appointment of such officials for an indefinite term. I need scarcely call your attention to the fact that very few engineers combine the qualities of a good engineer and a good politician, and it is very likely to happen that if a good engineer should seek election to office his opponent, if he is a good politician and a poor engineer, would defeat him, much to the detriment of the public.

Finally, I would call attention to the baneful influence of partisan politics and in a measure the influence of local community politics. A public road is a public utility which is a necessity to all of the people who have occasion to use it. It is a liability upon all the people who have to pay taxes for it. It is a constructive work which requires skill and knowledge and constant attention, and wherever, for political considerations, any of these essential features are ignored or modified the public must suffer. We must get to a condition of affairs where the practice of putting petty politicians in control of a vital public utility for the purpose of paying a political debt must be stopped; where the expenditure of the public money in constructing a public enterprise which is of benefit only to the politician or his immediate henchman, must be discontinued. The road system of the country must be treated as a great business enterprise and conducted honestly, wisely, and with a reasonable balance between benefits and burdens.

There are a great many people who favor improved roads, but I doubt if very many of them realize the vital significance of the good roads movement in America to-

day. Over half of our people is now concentrated in cities and towns and the city population is increasing far more rapidly than the country population. Our exports of food products have been falling off steadily until we are almost at the point where we shall have to go outside for food unless we increase production on the farm areas which are easily accessible. Isolated country churches are struggling along hopelessly in many cases because of their inaccessibility; country schools in states afflicted with bad roads show an alarmingly low ratio of attendance to enrollment as compared with the states which have reasonably good public road systems. For example, we found some years ago in five states which had an average of 1.5 per cent of road improvement, the school attendance was 59 out of each 100 pupils enrolled, while in five other states having an average of 40 per cent of improved roads, the school attendance was 78 out of each 100 pupils enrolled. Something must be done to improve the conditions of rural life, and I confidently assert that the improvement of public roads is one of the most effective of the remedies which can be proposed to better these conditions.

National aid to road improvement is one of the plans proposed, and I have no doubt this policy will be inaugurated in the near future. State aid is already well under way, and has been constantly growing since 1891, when New Jersey first embarked upon the plan of having aid granted directly by the state, and a measure of state supervision provided. Counties and states are bonding themselves to build hard-surfaced roads, and this is helping to some extent; but to my mind the primary necessity is to so reform and revise our existing road systems as to insure the efficient construction of the roads, continuous and adequate maintenance, and honest and capable handling of our road revenues.

I had hoped that when the states as units took hold of the road problem they at least would eliminate to a very great degree the baneful influence of politics, but the history of the changes in state highway departments during the past ten years would indicate that politics is as active there as in the local subdivisions. During the past

ten years there have been changes in the control of engineering work in the state highway departments of Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington and West Virginia. In the state of New York alone nine changes have been made in the state highway department in the last fifteen years. While it would be unfair to characterize all of these changes as unjustifiable, it is evident that the tenure of office is as a general rule insecure, that the official who should be absolutely free from political control is almost totally unable to act except at the dictates of those very forces. A conspicuous example of the short-sighted policy in effect under the political system is that of a certain state which a few years ago had a capable engineer employed as state highway engineer at $2,500 a year. A political change took place, and this man, who had given honest and capable endeavor to the work, was ousted and a local official put in his place. The experiment did not prove successful, and the state concluded to go back to its first choice. In order to do this they were compelled to reverse their judgment, and not only reinstate the first man but double his salary.

Recapitulating briefly the intrinsic defects of our present systems of road administration, I may say that they are first, extreme localization involving the maintenance of an unnecessarily large number of officials whose duties are similar and whose responsibilities are exceedingly vague. Second, the practice of requiring these officials to devote only a small fraction of their time to the work, thereby giving to the roads an irregular and intermittent attention. Third, the failure on the part of legislation or regulation to require that the officials who have direct charge of road construction and maintenance shall possess the qualifications essential for their work. Fourth, a general prevalence of the elective rather than the appointive plan, thereby giving an undue advantage to the politician as compared with the engineer. Fifth, the limiting the time of office of road officials to definite terms rather than to the full period of their usefulness. Sixth, the influence of political considerations in determining

the location of road improvement, the filling of offices, the making of appropriations and the general conduct of the work. These defects, as I have already stated, are not absolutely general throughout the United States. I understand that the merit system governs to some extent the road administration in several of the states, notably New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, and there are several of the state highway departments in which the state highway engineer or commissioner is appointed by a non-partisan board, but these instances may be cited as exceptions rather than the rule at the present time, and in some of these cases, the letter rather than the spirit of the merit system has prevailed.

Having diagnosed the disease, it remains for a remedy to be suggested. That remedy to my mind is the enactment of strict and clear-cut civil service legislation applicable to the entire road system in each state, and the conscientious and wise enforcement of such legislation. In the first place, a state highway engineer should be chosen by a non-partisan board and should hold office at the discretion of such a board. All subordinate positions in the department should be filled by rigid competitive examinations without regard to party affiliations. At this point I wish to call attention to the fact that we have recently filled the office of assistant director of the United States office of public roads by such a competitive examination and practically our entire force from messenger boy to director is filled in the same way by competitive examinations. The results are infinitely more satisfactory than the old spoils system, but this fact is so apparent to all students of the subject that I am merely wasting time to restate it. In regard to county and township road work, I think it would be advisable, wherever the system of government permits, to have the county as the smallest unit of administration, and to have one official who is required by law to possess a practical knowledge of road construction and maintenance, and who is appointed after examination, to be prescribed by the state highway department in co-operation with a state civil service commission. While it would probably be necessary to give the county board of commissioners or such officials as have

charge of county affairs the power to remove this road official, they should be compelled to appoint his successor upon certification from the register of the eligibles established by the state highway department and the state civil service commission. This would prevent removal of road officials for the purpose of substituting local politicians and would tend to permanency of office on the part of competent men and to easy removal of incompetent men. There should be provided by legislation and regulation sufficient compensation for the county road officer so that efficient men might be attracted to the work. Constant employment should be given and his subordinates should be capable men supplied in accordance with the spirit of the merit system. The objection has been made to the employment of county engineers, that some counties are utterly unable to pay a salary such as a competent engineer would require. This difficulty can be overcome in two ways, first by having legislation so framed as to permit two or more counties to jointly employ an engineer, or, second, to make the civil service regulations sufficiently elastic to enable a practical and efficient superintendent to be employed rather than a high-salaried technical engineer where conditions would appear to warrant it. Only when we arrive at that state of development where we recognize in the fullest degree the necessity for the application of the merit system in road administration in every unit of government, will we attain that standard of excellence in our public roads which would make them comparable to the roads of Europe.

I hope this distinguished body will actively join in the good roads movement, not for the purpose of urging larger expenditures, not for the purpose of urging national aid, not for the purpose of developing better methods of construction and maintenance, but for the distinct purpose of seeing that this great public trust is administered for the benefit of the public and as an example of civic righteousness and good management. From the monetary standpoint alone the introduction of the merit system will effect a saving of at least $50,000,000 a year, and I consider the monetary saving but the smallest part of the great possibilities in this movement. I would like to

see the National Civil Service Reform League represented at the Fourth Amercan Road Congress which will be held in the city of Atlanta next October or November. I would like to see this great organization in complete charge of a session of the Congress devoted solely to civil service reform in road administration, and if anything can be done at this meeting lookng to such participation, I earnestly hope that the opportunity will not be passed over.

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